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*Madonna's
Child*

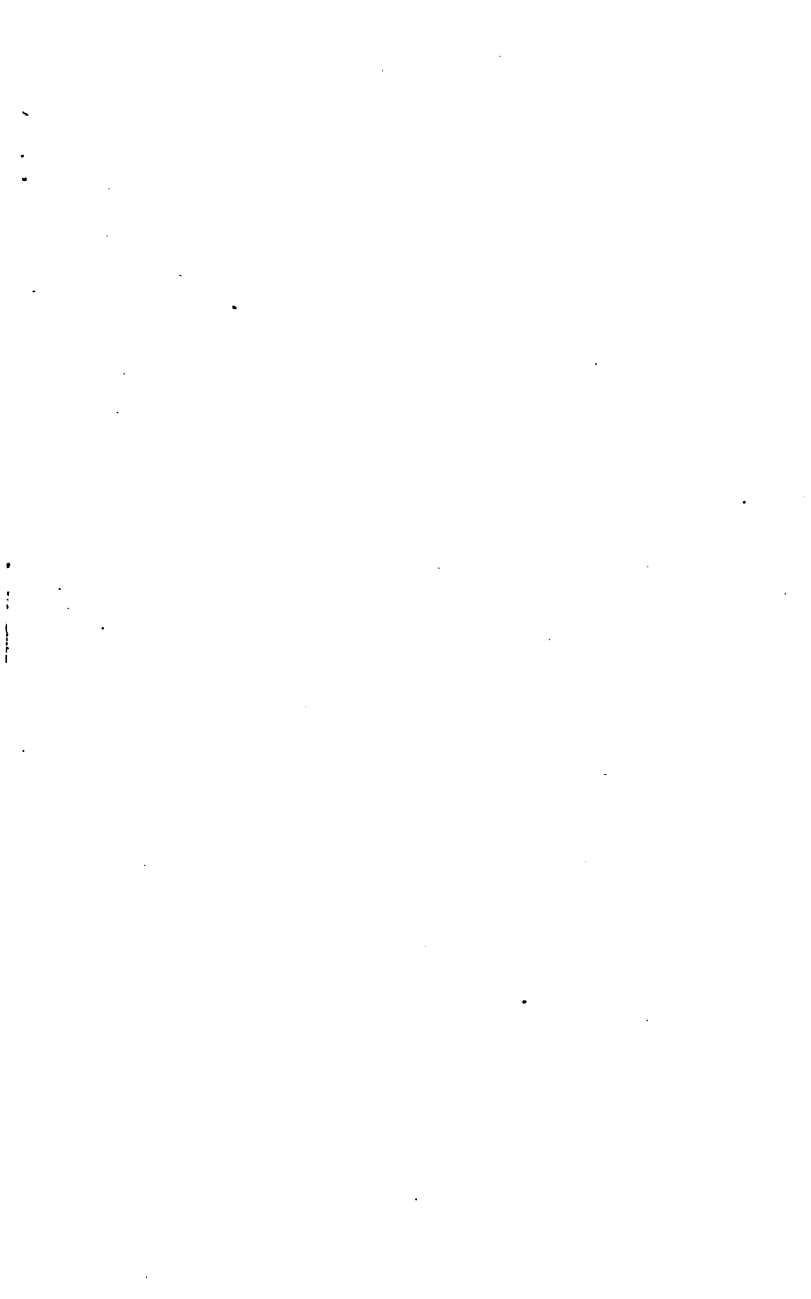


Alfred Austin



MADONNA'S CHILD







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MADONNA'S CHILD

BY

ALFRED AUSTIN

London

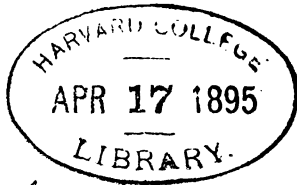
MACMILLAN AND CO.

AND NEW YORK

1895

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Lucy A good fund.

This is the Third Edition of "Madonna's Child" [as a separate publication, the first two editions having appeared in 1872 and 1873.]

TO
MY MOTHER
WITH
DEEP LOVE AND REVERENCE

May 30th, 1872.



PREFATORY NOTE

NEARLY a quarter of a century has elapsed since the first publication of *Madonna's Child*, and almost as long a period since it was allotted its due place in the Second Act of *The Human Tragedy*. Even then the hope was cherished that a distinct and separate existence might be reserved for it, partly from the pardonable partiality authors not unoften entertain for the first-born of their serious Muse, and in part because, as far as story and purpose are concerned, the little poem is complete in itself, and might conceivably be not unwelcome to some, whom the greater length, the less strictly individual interest, and the wider issues of *The Human Tragedy*, would be sure to repel. Now for some little time

inaccessible, save in that more voluminous work, it here reassumes its original and independent character.

At the time it was written, theological controversy was much in vogue; Christians, Socinians, and Agnostics, employing for the conversion or confusion of each other, month after month, in controversial symposia, their familiar and fruitless dialectics. In that protracted polemic the author had no part; nor can he easily conceive the circumstances in which he could be induced to discuss, before an audience alternately fanatical, indifferent, or scoffing, the most sacred speculations that can engage the mind of man. Happily, it is not the province of Poetry to solve intellectual perplexities, but rather to depict, with sympathetic impartiality, the grief, no less than the consolation, which even Religion occasionally brings to the human heart.

More nearly thirty-five than twenty-five years have come and gone since the author of *Madonna's Child* first trod the enchanting track traversed by Godfrid and Olympia on their fruitless pilgrimage to Milan. Even then Nice possessed as much vitality as was

imparted to it by the desultory traffic of the Riviera di Ponente, and Cannes was beginning to be known to foreign doctors and to English invalids. But Mentone was still a fishing village ; and, though the bastions of seaward-jutting Monaco had survived the shock of sanguinary centuries, Monte Carlo had as yet not even a nominal existence. The sole denizens of that bewitching region were urbane rustics, comely peasant-girls, blinking mules, rosary-girdled Franciscans, and clambering goats ; while the mountain-side had as yet been quarried but for homely dwellings and lamp-lit shrines. To that favoured fringe of fertile land that zigzags betwixt the mountains and the main, the resources of civilisation had not yet brought its medley of hedonists, gamblers, and hypochondriacs ; and the *contadini*, who now venally haggle over the price of their wilted wild-flowers, lavished on you, without stint or thought of payment, their grapes, their lemons, and their oleanders.

Happily, even in the most expansive eras Man is unable to annex the entire territory of Nature ; and

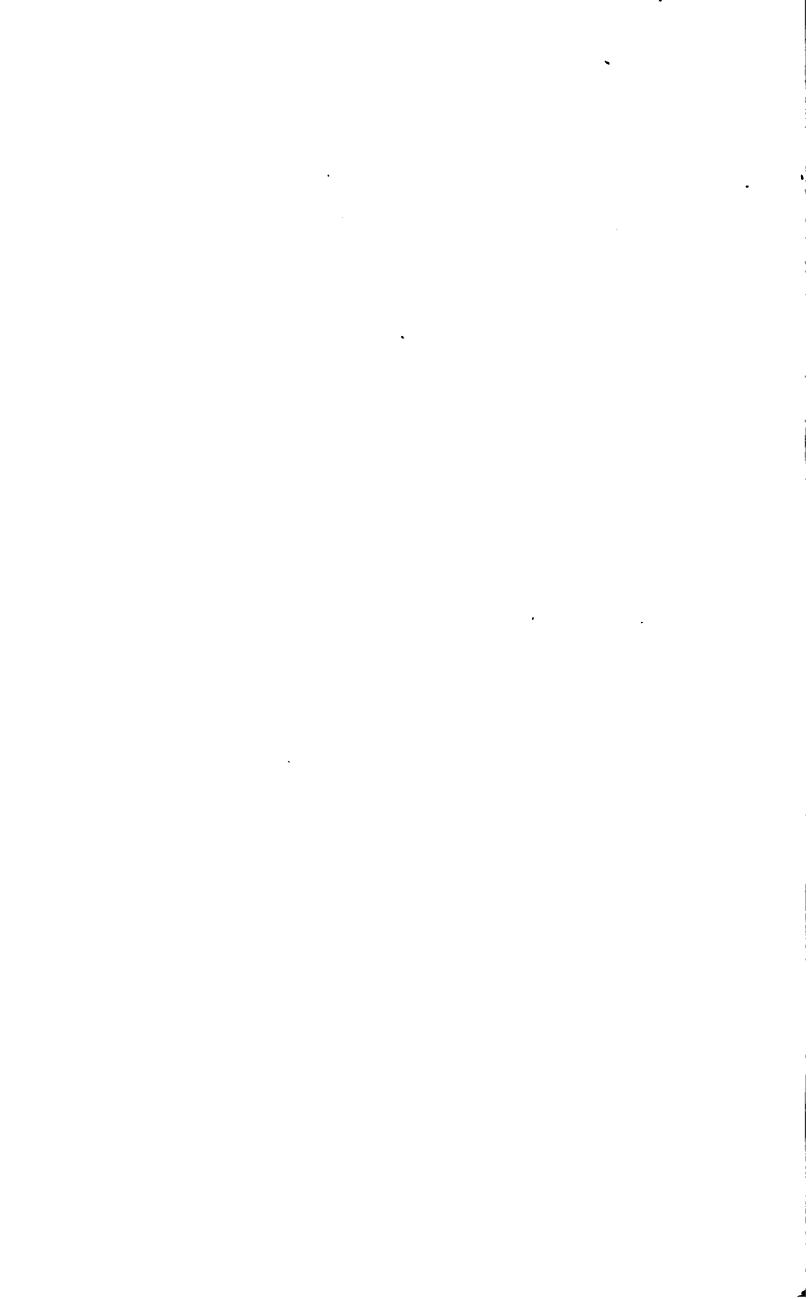
hence, though the sunny sea-line of the Riviera has had to abate somewhat of its pristine majesty, the hills, the woods, the ravines, the torrents, aye, even the vineyards and the olive-groves, that lie a little way back from the trite track of alien civilisation, have retained their primitive charm and old-world witchery. There the goats still browse in the myrtle clefts; there the peasant, as he prunes his fig-tree or waters his maize, still carols the love songs that were chanted by his sires centuries before Charles of Anjou fulfilled the prophecies of Savonarola. Sun-tanned crones still ply before their open doors the same unsophisticated distaff that Hector commended to Andromache; and bare-headed girls, poising above their columnar throats the well-adjusted chestnut faggots, still waft you, as you pass, the musical salutation "*Addio, e buon viaggio!*" Indeed, you may sometimes even meet a solitary friar, that pathetic survival of the unfittest, placidly contemplating a laborious world, and still deeply anchored in the belief that your unsolicited alms will be amply repaid by his Vesper orisons.

It is amid such scenes, and interrupted only by such companions, that I would fain think this Romance of the Riviera will sometimes be read. But I cherish a yet more presumptuous hope. It is that, seeking for Spiaggiascura, for the little chapel, and for the snow-white thorn, the reader may fondly believe that he has found them, and thence be tenderly led on to learn the fortunes of Godfrid and Olympia in the lurid climax of *The Human Tragedy*.

ALFRED AUSTIN.

SWINFORD OLD MANOR,

The Feast of the Purification, 1895.



MADONNA'S CHILD

I

MOTHER, there is a city in the South,
A silent little city by the sea,
Where a swift Alpine torrent finds its mouth,
And billowy mountains subside smilingly.
It knows nor weeping skies nor dewless drouth,
No seasons, save when April's glancing glee
Slow steadies unto Summer's warm-poised wing,
Or mimic Winter lifts the mask from Spring.

B

II

Once on a time it was a joyous city,
Joyous with love, and song, and graceful strife,
When men were chivalrous, and women witty,
And court and camp with revelry were rife.
Now is it hushed as long-forgotten ditty,
Secluded almshouse of a bankrupt life,
Refuge for him, who, after days of riot,
Craveth the smooth monotony of quiet.

III

No traveller's busy footstep cometh there,
No pallid form, more painlessly to die ;
No gainful barter thither doth repair ;
Even the boatman's oar and net pass by.
No clattering wheel and whip offend the air ;
Its streets but lead to mountain, sea, and sky,
And, when gaunt Winter stalks our shivering isle,
Bask, backed by hills, in ocean's rippling smile.

IV

Within it is a lovelier little chapel
Than ever wealth ordained or genius planned
For those famed shrines where art and splendour grapple,
Vainly, to blend the beautiful and grand.
No gold adorns it, and no jewels dapple,
No boastful words attest the builder's hand ;
Sacred to prayer, but quite unknown to fame,
Maria Stella Maris is its name.

V

Breaks not a morning but its snow-white altar
With fragrant mountain flowers is newly dight ;
Comes not a noon but lowly murmured psalter
Again is said with unpretentious rite ;
Its one sole lamp is never known to falter
In faithful watch through the long hush of night ;
From dawn to gloaming, open to devotion
Its portal stands, and to the swell of ocean.

VI

Never did form more nimble thread the dance
Than hers that scours the hill to find it flowers ;
Never did purer lips or holier glance
Watch for the striking of the sacred hours ;
No hands so leal e'er decked the warrior's lance,
As those which tend its lamp as darkness lours ;
And never since dear Christ expired for man,
Had holy shrine so fair a sacristan.

VII

Beyond its threshold she nor hearth nor home,
As tender maidens wont, had e'er possessed :
Only a window just above the foam,
Less like a chamber than a sea-bird's nest.
No mother's voice forbade her steps to roam,
No father's joy enslaved her to his breast ;
And all but answered, asked you of her line,
" A daughter of the sunlight and the shrine."

VIII

This year when streams enfranchised by the Spring
Came bounding to the ocean from the wold,
Just as the callow broods were 'tempting wing,
And bleating voices heard about the fold,
And almond blossoms trusty news did bring
Rude winds had scampered to their northern hold,
Within the chapel a strange face was seen,
Where for long days no stranger's face had been.

IX

When transubstantiated wine and bread
In mystic mass renewed the gainful loss
Of cruel Calvary, or tonsured head
From carven pulpit banned as worthless dross
All that the flesh can win, or doleful tread
Followed the tearful Stations of the Cross,
At Vespers' chant, at Benediction's prayer,
Or *Quarant' Ore*, was the stranger there.

X

Presence so constant she could scarcely fail,
Despite her own devotion, to perceive ;
Since there, as elsewhere, save the old and frail,
Or such as had some sudden cause to grieve,
Or when the Church's mandate must prevail,
Men came but seldom, and to quickly leave.
So she gave thanks one callous bosom less
Should mitigate the Sacred Heart's distress.

XI

Oft had he come, and knelt, and gone away,
Often returned and often knelt again,
Before her eyes, which, too absorbed to stray,
And not avoiding, rarely met the ken,—
As though as yet she scarcely knew that they
Had aught to do with, aught to fear from, men,—
Fell upon his, which, wont on her to gaze,
Forgot to curb their burning look of praise.

XII

Perhaps the woman's instinct failed in her.
Perhaps a maiden's bashfulness is more
A matron's lesson than our lips aver.
Shrank not her clear gray eyes his gaze before,
But, dipping finger so as scarce to stir
The water in the stoup beside the door,
She proffered it to his without dismay,
Turned, knelt, and crossed herself, and went her way.

XIII

Half a moon later, while the morn, yet early,
Smiled to the sound of reawakening trills,
When, though the mist, discomfited and surly,
Slowly retreating, hugged the higher hills,
On slopes below, the wild-rose blossom pearly
Sparkled with scented dew its sleep distils,
And None's faint bells afar were heard to chime,
Their eyes and hands met for a second time.

XIV

The bright incarnate spirit of the Morn,
Upon a stone mid-stream he saw her stand,
A tiptoe, straining at a snow-white thorn,
Whose bloom enticed but still escaped her hand
He, though of gracious courtesy inborn,
Yet by a sight so fairylike unmanned,
Sat like a statue that hath long while caught,
And keeps, immutable, some selfish thought.

XV

The ripple of the streamlet past her feet,
White thorn above her, whiter robe around,
The linnet-pipings nigh, the distant bleat,
Spiral lark-music in the blue sky drowned,
Blending of all, melodious and sweet,
To superficial sense and soul profound,
Steeped him in such oblivious trance, indeed
He in her beauty quite forgot her need.

XVI

Fingering a branch, she clutched it, but, alack !
It yielded as but yields a half-bent bow,
And with a sharp rebound sprang loosely back,
And all the bloom came showering down like snow,
Dappling the dark stream with a milk-white track ;
But where it fell on *her*, you could not know.
And then she gave a foiled despairing cry,
That sounded half a prayer and half a sigh.

XVII

Swift at the sound from selfish trance he woke,
And started up, and hastened to her aid ;
Sprang o'er the stepping stones, and deftly broke
A loftier bough in lovelier bloom arrayed,
And, as he tendered, reverently spoke :
" I pray you, sinless maiden." And she said,
" Thanks, gentle sir ; my flowers are not for me,
But for our Lady's shrine afront the sea."

XVIII

“ Then place these there,” he said, “ unless, indeed,
By my base touch their virtue be annulled ;
And, when your lips for other sinners plead,
Breathe one brief orison for him who culled.
In this cold world, where sunless lives we lead,
Faith oft grows petrified, contrition dulled ;
But who would not feel blest to know that prayers
Mounted from lips like yours to ears like Hers ?

XIX

“ And, if such favour may a stranger ask,”
He said in accents chivalrous and free,
That screened no foul presumption with fair mask,
“ May I your pious steps accompany ?
I still perchance can aid you in your task,
To crown with flowers our Lady of the Sea ;
Or, if that office but for you be meet,
May I not help to bear them to her feet ? ”

XX

Hers was a heart that knew not to deny.
Like the benign Madonna she adored,
She looked down ever with consenting eye
And smiling tenderness, whoe'er implored.
So, ere her lips could make their mild reply,
From candid gaze a gracious welcome poured.
"Come then," she said, "but quickly; we are late.
We must not let our loving Lady wait."

XXI

So down the dewy hill they swift descended,
She treading first, he following fast behind;
Anon by tracks that deviously wended,
Now by smooth paths as straight as blows the wind;
Until the vineyards and the city blended,
And then those vanished, and their ears resigned
The mountain torrent's intermittent roar
For baby waves that lisped against the shore.

XXII

The little temple's door stood open wide,
And all the place by sunshine was possessed,
From the groined roof which time had slowly dyed,
Down to the inlaid altar whitely dressed.
But the smooth walls that rose on either side,
Were marble ; marble was the floor you pressed ;
So that, withal, the spot seemed fresh and cool,
Even as shady grove or reedy pool.

XXIII

Full on the left an antique pulpit rose,
Of structure quaint, and it was marble too,
Where hands long numb had carven, as they chose,
Odd allegories, fair and foul to view.
Here virgins, calm as newly fallen snows,
Bearing curved palms, and singing hymns to you ;
There long lank demons gnawing damnéd souls,
And bastard animals, and nightmare scrolls.

XXIV

But from these fancies twain you turned full soon,
For on the right the Virgin Mother stood,
Down from her flowing hair to sandal-shoon
The mystic type of maiden motherhood.
Below her feet there curved a crescent moon,
And all the golden planets were her hood ;
In comely folds her queenly garb was moulded,
And over her pure breast her hands were folded.

XXV

She looked the most immortal mortal being
That ever yet descended from the skies,
As one who seemed to see all, without seeing,
And without ears to hear man's smothered sighs ;
With all our discords the one note agreeing,
'Mid death and hate a love that never dies ;
A tranquil silence amid fretful din,
And still the sinless confidant of sin.

XXVI

And now the mountain maiden spread the store
Of wondrous whiteness from the hawthorn bower,
Culled by the stranger, on the marble floor,
And from her lap discovered many a flower :
Anemones on long lithe stems that soar,
Bold daffodils that thrive on sun and shower,
The gay outriders of the regal Year,
And the blue stars to parting lovers dear.

XXVII

All these her fingers fancifully wrought
Into festoons and wreaths and posies fair,
Then from an inner sanctuary brought
Vases of delicate tint but simplest ware,
And round the statue, nimbly as her thought,
Ranged them, till not a single spot seemed bare.
Whereon she back retired a little space,
And eyed her handiwork with questioning face.

XXVIII

“ There, it is done, tho’ ill. Now let us kneel,
And beg our gracious Mother to accept
Our tribute poor, since paid with homage leal.”
Therewith a pace or two she forward stepped,
And her fair knees the marble fair did feel.
He just a little way behind her crept,
And, forcing his proud limbs to bend, obeyed
Her sovran word, and watched her as she prayed.

XXIX

Her hands were clasped, her eyes cast meekly down,
Down her smooth cheek the tender tear-drop stole,
And under kerchief white and bodice brown
Heaved the pure tumult of her sinless soul.
Oh ! soon the Lady with the starry crown
Will sure, he thought, step from her flowery knoll,
And, subtly quickened by celestial charms,
Enfold this virgin form in virgin arms !

XXX

How long she thus remained, he noted not,
But, like to one whose count of time is stayed,
Still as she knelt, knelt rooted to the spot,
And when she rose, rose, following like a shade ;
And still, the place, the hour, the scene forgot,
Though sooth he should have bidden adieu, delayed ;
Until she timorously broke the spell
With the faint words : " I thank you, sir ; farewell ! "

XXXI

" Farewell ! " he said,—her shadow even in speech ;
But the sad sound dissolved his sunny dream :
" Farewell, farewell ! but may we, I beseech,
Not meet once more beside the rippling stream,
Or on the grassy slope, or pebbly beach,
Or even here, which meeter still would seem ?
And, to befriend me, tell me, ere I go,
The name in Heaven by which you are known below ! "

XXXII

“Still come, at your good will,” she frankly said,
“Where the hills rise, or where the long waves fall,
Or where the stream runs babbling o’er its bed,
Or in this chapel, dearest spot of all,
And you by me will still be welcomed,
If you, like me, will be my Lady’s thrall.
My name, sir, is Olympia.” “Godfrid, mine.”
And so they parted, with no further sign.

XXXIII

And she within the little chapel kept ;
But he went downward to the shining shore.
The sun yet higher along the heavens had stept,
Withal to him it glowed not as before.
The morning magic from the hills had crept,
The little city a dimmed lustre wore ;
The waves had lost their music, and his breast
Heaved, beneath load of vacancy opprest.

XXXIV

Not of the climes where song and sunshine steep
The blood in honeyed idleness was he,
Where waking hours are but a conscious sleep,
And noons, like nights, delicious vacancy ;
But of that restless race who work and reap,
Whose hearths are warded by the surly sea,
A swordlike stock, half vigour and half gloom,
Which, when it smites not, must itself consume.

XXXV

But he had fallen upon mournful times
When all great deeds were stagnant. Tales of fame
The isle still haunted, and in sounding rhymes
Were sometimes sung, barren of future aim.
The leaders of the land were supple mimes,
Greedy of passing plaudits, sold to shame ;
By whose base drugs, into deep slumber cast,
A once great Realm lay pillowed on its past.

XXXVI

The sacred Sceptre's virtue was confessed
Therein no more ; no man no man obeyed.
They had disarmed Authority ; the best
Were worst of all, few, feeble, and afraid.
Religion, long inviolable guest,
A menial first, an alien now was made ;
There was no end, no means, to prompt or please,
Save poor brute toil, or rich imbruted ease.

XXXVII

But he was of the strain of those who still
Are noble or are nothing ; who in days,
Empty of worthy purpose, curb their will,
And, though instinct with action, stand and gaze.
Secluded vale and solitary hill
Are more to them than ignominious praise ;
And o'er the world when night and dark are drawn,
Silent they wait till God brings back the dawn.

XXXVIII

So home he left, and o'er the vain-ploughed sea,
Through groaning cities, and long, silent fields,
Past poplars tall, and many a crocused lea,
To where the vine its clustering fruitage yields,
Onward he journeyed, until herb and tree
Still scantier grew, and their protecting shields
The Alps threw out, and on his cheek he felt
The crisp winds swoop from snows that never melt.

XXXIX

Yet not longwhile within the cold embrace
Of the unruffled mountains did he stay,
Nor by hushed lakes that still reflect their face,
Darkly by night, translucently by day,
But by snow-suckled torrents sought to trace
His devious, lone, and uninstructed way,
Until they led him to that tideless sea
That laps the shore of what *was* Italy.

XL

Thence to Spiaggiascúra passed he on,
That silent little city by the shore,
Whence stir of busy life longwhile hath gone,
And where the laugh of youth is heard no more.
He fain earth's fardels ne'er again would don,
But henceforth only simple right implore
To sit i' the sun, and wise ensample win
From pale Lent lilies that nor toil nor spin.

XLI

The tenderness which drenches the lone mind,
Insensibly as dew distilled at night,
Made him, of late, cast many a look behind
Of fondness towards a Creed abandoned quite.
He felt his hands clasped by a parent kind
In infant prayer ; he saw each dear old rite ;
He heard the hymns of childhood, and he breathed
The scent of flowers with sacred incense wreathed.

XLII

For not in scorn, but he, bowed-down and blenched,
Had passed out from the Temple. Ere he went,
With secret tears the altar-steps he drenched,
Aware he sped to utter banishment.
From home, hearth, Heaven, reluctant heart he wrenched,
The stern exiler of his past content ;
Bidding adieu to Faiths which, well he knew,
Cease not to comfort, ceasing to be true.

XLIII

Thus with mute wisdom seated in his mind,
And tenderness chief tenant of his heart,
He left the wasteful, turbid strifes behind,
In which the understanding ne'er take part ;
And, by his very loneliness inclined
To welcome a new anodyne for smart
Not yet quite old, he found his footsteps halt
Where Spiaggiascura fronts the waters salt.

XLIV

There found he all the disenchanted crave :
Beauty, and solitude, and simple ways ;
The quiet-shining hills, the long lithe wave,
Now white-fringed fretting into rough-curved bays,
Now swirling smoothly where the flat sand gave
A couch whereon to end its stormy days ;
Plain folk and primitive, made courteous by
Traditions old ; and a cerulean sky.

XLV

In this new home, the fretful or the proud
Had trivial deemed, he with a windless will
Let his soul rest, as rests a summer cloud
On the soft summit of a rounded hill.
He joined the little city's mimic crowd
On early market morns, when down each rill
That marks a mountain track, with faces brown
Tall peasant folk came winding to the town.

XLVI

But long before the sun was hot and high,
They up the hill again were mounting slow,
And soon their forms were lost in cleft and sky.
Then Godfrid through the quiet streets would go,
Greeting and greeted by chance passer-by,
Or sometimes halting where, with locks of snow,
A bent old dame sate spinning at her door,
Then saunter downward to the vacant shore.

XLVII

But now the spot endeared to him before
By fair simplicity and lonely grace,
Had to his heart grown dearer more and more,
Since he had gazed upon Olympia's face,
Had seen her with upraisèd eyes adore
The sinless Mother in the sacred place,
And carried in his arms her garlands sweet,
Swift down the hill following her fawnlike feet.

XLVIII

He thought how good, how restful it would be,
How cool of shade when fierce suns glare and scorch,
What placid haven from a plunging sea,
If he within the little temple's porch
Might brood in reverent quietude, while she,
Purer of heart, still fed the altar's torch,
And dwell with her, his doubt despite, almost
As near as she to Heaven's angelic host.

XLIX

He saw her with the streaming sunlight come
Over the hills, over the mountains gray ;
He heard her in the rising dawn-wind's hum,
He felt her in the warmth of glowing day.
She sang to him when all the groves were dumb,
Peopled the pine-slope's solitary way,
Walked the long sands, leaving no print the while,
And in the rippling wave infused her smile.

L

Thus while his heart grew rooted to the spot,
The sea lay dimpling with perpetual smiles,
Calm as a babe that sleeps within its cot,
And hushed as lake, dotted with fairy isles.
The winds were all shut up in Æolus' grot,
Heaven free from cloud that darkens or defiles,
And not the frailest blossom fluttered down
From drooping branch within the tiny town.

LI

But when a sunny sevensnight had passed,
Slow from the south there crept a curling cloud,
Which bore within its womb a rising blast,
That soon was crying amid sail and shroud ;
And, as it wailed, the sky grew overcast,
Lurid and low ;—whereat the breakers proud
Curved their gray crests, flung up their forelocks hoar,
And, wildly rearing, leaped against the shore.

LII

And still as waned the day the fume-ful ocean
Higher and higher rose, and to and fro
The slippery billows slid in shapeless motion,
Now dense and dark, now shivered into snow ;
Then once again as thick as hell-hag's potion,
Clotted with briny litter from below :
Like leaden coffins yawning on the sight,
Then swiftly covered with a pall of white.

LIII

And where the sun would have been seen to set,
If sun had been, the sky was darkened most,
And drooped the welkin lower and lower yet,
As Night stole on without her starry host.
Anon, with flapping wings and stormy threat,
Foul seagulls came, and screamed along the coast ;
Then utter dark closed in, before, behind,
• And over all loud growled the wolfish wind.

LIV

'Twas midnight, and the waves were rolling in ;
But in the little town were none who slept,
Save dotage deaf or childhood free from sin.
Pale in their beds, the rest scared vigil kept,
Crossing themselves, and listening to the din ;
And, as it swelled, the women wailed and wept,
And wrung their hands, thinking of those at sea,
Then hushed their babes, waked by the threnody.

LV

But one there was who neither wept nor prayed,
Nor sought a wakeful mockery of repose,
Was by the restless waves unrestful made,
And whose wild pulse still with the billows rose.
He, through the darkness, lone and unafraid,
Courted the storm and braved the tempest's blows,
Heard the rough surf's reverberating beat,
And felt the firm shore shaken 'neath his feet.

LVI

When all at once he marked a steady star
Spangle the gloom,—small, but surpassing bright,
Which seemed to shine nor near nor yet afar,
But glow suspended on the breast of night.
'Twas luminous as clear-faced planets are,
And then he saw it was the succouring light,
The Stella Maris, that Madonna's flower
Tended within the lonely chapel tower.

LVII

It led him on ; he left the deafening tide,
And to the silent portal nearer drew,
Until no more the star could be descried,
The low porch hiding the tall tower from view.
But still across the bounding waters wide
Its steadfast ray a rippling pathway threw :
A glittering wedge of light that clave in twain
The inexorable night and murky main.

LVIII

But now the chapel door was closed and barred ;
So on the smooth cold step he sat him down,
And pitying thought of the stout hearts that warred
With the fell surge, or dropped their hold to drown.
Ah me ! but life is dear, and death is hard,
Though, when life smiles, we only fret and frown ;
From its full breast, sick nurslings, turn and cry,
To clutch it wildly as the stream runs dry.

LIX

So for awhile he mused. But soon his brain,
Careless to solve, let go the tangled theme ;
And then strange thoughts, a desultory train,
Unbidden came and went, as in a dream.
Now he was tossing on the seething main,
Now at a shrine, lit by one pale lamp's gleam,
Kneeling with worshippers composed in prayer ;—
And then, anon, whirled thro' the empty air.

LX

How long he thus sat dream-bound, could be known
To darkness only. But at length he heard
A sound that neither was the billow's moan,
Nor howl of storm, nor scream of wheeling bird.
The porch behind him shook, and the numb stone
Whereon he sat, it seemed to him, was stirred ;
And in the doorway, wimpled with a hood
That backward drooped, the Virgin Mother stood.

LXI

So, for an instant, to his sight it seemed ;
But, by the fantasy not long beguiled,
He saw it was Olympia's self that beamed
Upon the darkness and the waters wild.
Yet was she heavenly as the thing he dreamed,
As pure, as potent, pitiful, and mild ;
And at her beck he looked to see the waves
Crouch, and the winds go shambling to their caves.

LXII

But still the storm raged on. "Olympia ! see,
See, I am here," he said, still cowering down ;
And when she heard him not, about her knee
His arm he curved, and kissed her sacred gown.
"Godfrid !" she cried, "Godfrid ! oh, come with me,
Come quick within, and pray for those that drown !
In vain I watch and sue with many a tear ;
But if we both should pray, She still will hear."

LXIII

"She hear !" he pleaded ; "hearken rather thou !"
Clutching her robe, and nestling at her feet ;
"For never storm broke over failing prow
As on my breast the whelming billows beat.
A long-tossed mariner I, behold me now
Straining to shore, craving for haven meet.
Oh, lift me, feeble, from life's weltering waves,
And fold me, shipwrecked, to the heart that saves !"

LXIV

“O Godfrid, talk not, talk not, thus !” she said ;
“I will be tender, so you will be calm ;
There is no woe can not be comforted,
And for worst wound Heaven holds some blessed balm.
I ne'er had heavy heart or aching head,
But that I found, in psalter or in psalm,
In mental prayer, or Mary's mystic beads,
A swift and most sure solace for my needs.”

LXV

“Yes, but,” he answered, “mine a deeper woe,
Than rosary, or prayer, or psalm can probe.
I at my mother's knee was taught to throw
Myself on Heaven, and cling to Mary's robe ;
But, like yon waves that wander to and fro,
Homeless and aimless through the whirling globe,
I flow now where Fate bids me, nor demand
Why there it ebbs, and here reseeks the strand.

LXVI

“Still to the Sovereign Will I humbly bow,
If I no longer grace or gift implore ;
And, Heaven's own handmaid, listen to my vow,
Or Hope will die, where Faith hath died before.
And what is it I ask, Olympia, now,
If not one intermediary more ?
You through Madonna your requests prefer,
And I through you will waft my wants to Her.”

LXVII

Then rising, with his face he sought her face ;
But on what piteous sight his sight now fell !
Though hidden in her hands, withal apace
From the veiled lids he saw the tear-drops well.
And as he strove distractedly to brace
His heart against its weakness, and to quell
Her surging grief, “ Not pray ! Not pray ! ” she cried ;
Then bared her gaze, and wailed out at his side :

LXVIII

“ Alas ! that ever by the rippling stream,
Under the blossoming thorn, our steps did meet !
Alas, alas, that I to you should seem
Winsome, and you to me undreamt-of sweet !
I thought you loved Madonna ; was it a dream
I saw you carry garlands to her feet ?
I told you—did I not ?—I was her child,
Hers only, wholly, till you came and smiled.

LXIX

“ And I *am* Hers—not yours, not yours indeed.
Nay, urge not, speak not, Godfrid ! for your tongue
Is as a dagger from whose strokes I bleed.
Hither return when the first lark hath sung,
And I meanwhile will watch, and weep, and plead
You yet may pray, as once you prayed when young.
Now go and rest ! And in her hallowed keeping
Madonna hold you, while your cares are sleeping.”

LXX

She ceased, and with the cadence seemed to raise
Her hands to bless, whereat he bowed his head.
But when again he sought her lenient gaze,
The door was closed, the angelic vision fled.
Alone and outcast in the moaning ways
He stood, with winds and billows for his bed :
It seemed as if Heaven's self had thrust him out
To utter darkness, for the fiends to flout.

LXXI

Radiant with smiles, with limbs of rosy hue,
Up from Tithonus' couch Aurora came,
Her golden chariot scattering sparks of dew,
Her glowing coursers breathing genial flame ;
And, as of old, the glorious retinue
Of youth and beauty trumpeted her fame.
Fleet from her presence fled the winds ; the waves
Crouched at her feet, owning themselves her slaves.

LXXII

You cannot kill the Gods. Their shadows still
The cherished rites of Pagan eld renew,
Haunt the cool grot, or scour the thymy hill,
And in the wood their wanton sports pursue.
This very morn I heard Pan's pastoral quill,
And tracked Diana's sandals o'er the dew,
Caught dimpled Venus veiled in feathery foam,
And Faunus scampering to his sylvan home.

LXXIII

And if Jove prove not the last god dethroned,
But Heaven at length Olympus' fate should feel,
Deem not, withal, its choirs shall be disowned,
Or dumb oblivion o'er its seraphs steal.
Still shall calm Stephen smile on martyrs stoned,
Fair sinners still to Magdalen appeal ;
Cecilia's touch still wake the sacred lyre,
And lamblike Agnes spotless loves inspire.

LXXIV

Such were the thoughts that stirred in Godfrid's brain,
As rose the sun o'er ocean rounded rim,
And once again he slowly sought to gain
Olympia's side, as she had bidden him.
There was a silence on the shimmering main,
And the white city did in sunshine swim ;
You would have thought the griefs that make men gray
Had, like the storm, been spirited away.

LXXV

The chapel door stood open wide ; the air,
Within, was sweet and fragrant as the clove.
Gold-dappled bees were humming everywhere,
Fancying Madonna's shrine a honeyed grove ;
And, overhead, fluttered by coming care,
A little bird flew to and fro, and strove
To find some niche secure from ravage rude,
Where it might build its nest, and rear its brood.

LXXVI

Over the marble pavement pure as snow,
Faint yellow butterflies flickered, gaily dight,
Whose shifting shadows you might scarcely know
From golden flaws within the spotless white.
But for the rest, around, above, below,
There was no breath, no stir, no sound, no sight ;
It was as quiet as could quiet be,
And all the place seemed lapped in vacancy.

LXXVII

The glamour that in silent beauty dwells
Chased for awhile the woe that love, despairing,
Feeds still with hope; but soon, for all its spells,
He felt the moments somewhat sadly wearing ;
Till from the sacristy, with snow-white bells,
Olympia came, a lily lilies bearing,
And, having laid them at Madonna's feet,
Gazed on him salutation sad but sweet.

LXXVIII

On her young cheek no more the rose did blow
Such as from hedgerow in lush June you pull,
But, in its stead, her face was washed with woe,
Though of the sort which maketh beautiful ;
Her large orbs, swart and satin as the sloe,
Whose lustrous light no sorrow could annul,
Yet wore a strangely grave and settled look,
Like a dark pool, and not the laughing brook.

LXXIX

“Tell me my fate !” he cried, grasping her hand.
“Your fate !” she answered, “tell me rather mine !
Bend pride’s stiff knee ; no longer grace withstand,
And I will be irrevocably thine !
If not, I can but bow to Heaven’s command,
And my poor heart must your rich heart resign.
I am Madonna’s child, come woe, come weal,
Come life, come death ! O Godfrid ! bend and kneel !’

LXXX

There was a moment's hush, brief but intense,
Like to a billow pausing ere it break.
Then, with a sinking of the bosom, whence,
More than the lips, the answer came, he spake,
And said "I cannot!" ending hope's suspense,
And leaving, where it died, love's lasting ache.
But still he clutched her hand, as, in the wave,
Men bent on death will strive themselves to save.

LXXXI

And, as he held her thus, her sight grew dim,
Her other hand on Mary did she lay,
And turned from him to her, from her to him,
As soul and sense alternately did sway ;
Like one of those primeval seraphim,
Pure spirit, but love-chained to a child of clay,
Immortal born, with just that mortal leaven,
Enticed to earth, but quick recalled to Heaven.

LXXXII

Anon she said : " From Milan's sinful crowd;
There soars, as I have heard, a marble pile,
Whose topmost pinnacles are lost in cloud,
And, ere the mountains, catch day's dawning smile.
The gorgeous palaces that house the proud
Are dwarfed by its vast nave and thick-trunked aisle,
And wealth and pomp of courts seem sordid things,
To its rich worship of the King of kings.

LXXXIII

" And learn'd men its famous Chapter fill,
Learn'd since breathed on by the Holy Ghost,
Chief among whom, in days they talk of still,
This little town could for its pastor boast.
He in my budding soul was first to instil
Sweet precepts, tidings from the heavenly host,
Love of my dear Madonna, and a life
That never thought to find in fondness, strife.

LXXXIV

“Come, let us go, and, if you will, afoot,
And to that sacred shrine make pilgrimage ;
And our joint journey in your mind may put
Wise counsel, and your bitter doubts assuage.
If not, then he—for I will set him to't,—
With heavenly argument and reason sage
Shall melt the heart that to my prayer is cold,
And win you back, lost sheep, to Christ's dear fold.”

LXXXV

Now woke the morn, fresh as a maiden wakes,
And, while the world still slept, forth hand in hand
Went Godfrid and Olympia. Lagging flakes
Of silvery mist, by light gales curled and fanned,
Fled up the hill ; from feathery-foliaged brakes .
There rang melodious matins ; on the sand,
And on the sea, glistened a pearly dew ;
And, over both, bright bent the heavens blue.

LXXXVI

He had a leathern satchel at his back,
And in her breast a crucifix she bore ;
And, hand-in-hand, they took the sinuous track
That lies between the mountains and the shore.
Far on the main was many a brown-sailed smack,
Upon the hillside many a ruin hoar ;
With many a fluttering wing the air was sown,
But on the mountain road themselves alone.

LXXXVII

Soon as they reached the last and loftiest crest
Whence could Spiaggiascura be descried,
Halting, they took their first brief snatch of rest,
By a bright well that bubbled at their side.
There, as she said a prayer within her breast,
He prayerless gazed upon the prospect wide ;
And then the twain, hands linking as before,
Strode on, nor saw the little city more.

LXXXVIII

Through smiling tracts, defended from the snows,
All the year basking in the sun's warm ray,
And fanned by every fostering gale that blows,
Tracts that are Eden still, their journey lay.
Leftward the far-receding mountains rose,
Upon the right ranged headland, creek, and bay,
And jutting promontories, round which the bright
Blue ocean ended in a fringe of white.

LXXXIX

High up the hill were smooth steep pastures green,
Whence tinkling herd-bells fitful reached the ear ;
And, in the rough and bosky clefts between,
Browsed shaggy goats, clambering where all was sheer :
While, but half heard, and only faintly seen,
There a thin silvery thread, a white speck here,
Dashed the precipitous torrent, soon to flow
Glibly adown the gradual slope below :

XC

The smiling slope with olive groves bedecked,
Now darkly green, now, as the breeze did stir,
Spectral and white, as though the air were flecked
With elfin branches tipped with gossamer ;
And then so faint, Godfrid could scarce detect
Which the gray hillside, which the foliage fair ;
Until once more it dense and sombre grew,
Again to shift, just as the zephyr blew.

XCI

Nigher their ken were mulberry, fig, and vine,
This linked to those in many a long festoon,
'Neath which the wise, when days are long, recline,
Reaping the hours in a deep golden swoon.
The tendrils yet had but begun to twine
Round the pale stems that would be hidden soon ;
But, in the cradling furrows lodged between,
Peeped sprouting maize, and grasses newly green.

XCII

And here and there with glistering lemon bowers
The lower landward terraces were crowned,
Or shapely orange groves, whose fragrant flowers
Make of the land a bride the whole year round.
Pink petals from the almond fell in showers,
Making a vernal carpet for the ground ;
Over the walls peered tufts of yellow broom,
And oleanders reddening into bloom.

XCIII

And ever and anon some quiet town
Came into view, and thro' it straight they passed,
Though once mayhap its name had won renown
In this strange world, where nothing great doth last.
With braided hair, bronzed limbs, and girded gown,
Ranged round a fountain flowing clear and fast,
Their eyes as bright as day, yet dark as night,
Bent stalwart women, washing linen white.

XCIV

And round the open thresholds children fair,
Happy and lithe as lizards, romped and ran,
Their grandams sitting by in sunny chair ;
But, in the ways, never a sign of man.
He was away, steadying the ox-drawn share,
Trimming the vine-clasped elm to shapely span,
Or through his maize in many a trivial course
Scattering the rampart torrent's forward force.

XCV

In each broad market-place a church there was,
With campanile soaring straight in air,
And open door for whosoe'er should pass.
And once or twice, to say a hasty prayer,
Olympia stole within, though he, alas !
Without remained, mute in the noontide glare.
But ne'er a shrine they saw which, to their mind,
Was half so fair as that they had left behind.

XCVI

When, for awhile, the sea got lost to view,
Since landward now the hilly pathway wound,
By aromatic pine-slopes stern of hue,
Which shut the sunlight out, their gaze was bound.
Beyond their ken the shaggy summits grew ;
Grimly, below them, yawned ravine profound,
Wherethro' swift torrent a rough pathway tore,
Filling the sombre silence with its roar.

XCVII

But soon again the black pass broadened out,
On them once more the welcome sunshine streamed,
And budding larches, dotted sparse about
Among dark firs, like fairy foliage gleamed.
In valleys green they heard the shepherds shout
To flocks that browsed and herds that dosed and dreamed ;
Torrent no more, the stream beneath them flowed,
Devious, yet smooth, e'en as their mountain road ;

XCVIII

Seeking a softly undulating plain
With trellised red-roofed villages bestrewed,
Whence, as the light of day began to wane,
Ave Maria rang from belfries rude.
The air, the hills, the reappearing main,
Felt the soft touch of twilight's tender mood ;
And every bosom in that region fair,
All, saving one alone, o'erflowed with prayer.

XCIX

For at the foot of a tall roadside cross,
Whereon the martyred Godhead patient hung,
And round whose base soft-greenly grew the moss,
By hill-dews fed, herself Olympia flung,
And, like to one who mourns some bitter loss,
Yet hides the grief wherewith the heart is wrung,
There silently to Heaven her vows preferred,
Yet because mute, oh, not less surely heard !

C

But when once more she rose up to her feet,
Still at his side to bravely trudge along,
Her heart, he saw, with quicker pulses beat,
And lo ! she burst, unbidden, into song.
It was a melody unearthly sweet,
Which the fond ear for ever would prolong ;
And with her voice, as ceased the belfries' clang,
The craggy hollows of the mountain rang.

I

O Mary Mother, full of grace,
Above all other women blest,
Through whose pure womb our erring race
Beholds its sin-born doom redressed,

Pray for us !

Thou by the Holy Ghost that wert
With every heavenly gift begirt,
Thou that canst shield us from all hurt,

Pray for us ! Pray for us !

2

Tower of David, Ivory Tower,
Vessel of Honour, House of Gold,
Mystical Rose, unfading Flower,
Sure refuge of the unconsoled,

Pray for us !

Mirror of Justice, Wisdom's Seat,
Celestial shade for earthly heat,
The sinner's last and best retreat,

Pray for us ! Pray for us !

3

O thou of Heaven that art the gate,
That to the feeble strength dost bear,
To whom no outcast turns too late,
E'en when thy Son is deaf to prayer,

Pray for us !

O Morning Star, to chase the dark,
Cause of our joy through care and cark,
Thou of the Covenant the Ark,

Pray for us ! Pray for us !

4

Bright Queen of the angelic choir,
Of patriarchs, prophets, worshipped Queen !
Queen of the martyrs proved by fire,
And Queen of confessors serene ;
Queen of the apostolic train,
Queen that o'er all the saints doth reign,
O Queen conceived without a stain !

Pray for us ! Pray for us !

CI

So ceased the strain, and with it ceased the day.
The mountains slowly wrapped themselves in night ;
Far off, the silent sea gloomed cold and gray,
Sky-sundered by one long low line of white.
Over the vale, far down, a flat mist lay,
Which for a phantom lake bewrayed the sight ;
And louder now they heard the watchdogs bark,
And cataracts dashing downward through the dark.

CII

Therefore with eager eye and quickened pace
Descried they twinkling lights not far ahead ;
But many a zigzag yet had they to trace,
Descending ever, ere their hopes were fed.
At length they heard the voices of the place,
Sought out the inn, and craved for board and bed ;
Two little sleeping chambers side by side,
And what rude fare the mountains could provide.

CIII

Yet as that day full many a league their feet
Had traversed, and would dawn bring many more,
Olympia early rose from fireside seat.
Reverent, he saw her to her chamber door,
Bent o'er her hand, and wished her slumber meet ;
Then, to the warm hearth fed by pine logs hoar
Returning, sat him down, and by their light
Mused, mute and mournful, far into the night.

CIV

But she, when in her little room shut in,
First, on her knees, her prayers to Heaven addressed ;
These said, her simple gown she did unpin,
And of their robes her modest limbs divest.
Some mountain jonquils, that had gathered been
By Godfrid, fondly to her heart she pressed ;
Then on the pillow laid her weary head,
And guardian angels gathered round the bed.

CV

So for three days they journeyed, till they came
Where once-proud Genoa sits beside the sea,
Striving her antique temper yet to tame
To the stern bidding of the days that be :
Ghost of gay Eld, the same yet not the same,
As when she shone, beautiful, brave, and free,
Her airy pennon flouting every strand,
And Neptune's trident glittering in her hand.

CVI

But, with the breaking of another morn,
They rose betimes and traveled with the crowd,
Roaring through tunneled hill, and loudly borne
On wings of wind past leagues of land and cloud,
Where the Ligurian hoed his patch of corn,
Or through his vines the Lombard peasant ploughed ;
Till, with mid-afternoon, they could descry
The pinnacles of Milan prick the sky.

CVII

And soon, once more afoot, their steps were bent
Through intersecting streets whose broad slant eaves,
Stretching athwart the footway, made a tent
For the hot sun, almost as cool as leaves.
It seemed that the whole city with them went ;
And when they reached the piazza that receives
Many a convergent way, a streaming crowd
Surged up the steps of the cathedral proud.

CVIII

So, never halting in the glowing square
A moment even, though the fretted fane,
Flamboyant oriel, pinnacles poised in air,
One after one the eye would count in vain,
Bold-flying buttress, tall shaft tapering fair,
And dazzling front, might well their gaze detain,
For the main door they made with all the folk,
Till on their ear the pealing organ broke.

CIX

A moment more, and lo ! they stood within !
A cry of wonder from Olympia burst ;
But on the instant seeing that He, whom sin
Doomed to dire death upon the rood accurst,
Shone on the altar, veiled by mystery thin,
Straight knelt she down, and, soon in prayer immersed,
Forgot the crowd, long aisles, and columns tall,
While Godfrid gazed and marvelled at it all.

CX

Each valid foot of transept, nave, and aisle,
Was dense with living things absorbed in prayer ;
Young men and maidens, children without guile,
Gray sires with flowing beard and bosom bare ;
Smooth sinless faces here, that seemed to smile,
Even as they prayed, with eyes soft-closed ; and there,
Hard furrowed visages down which the tears
Flowed from the brackish fount of desert years.

CXI

With comely kerchief crossed o'er bosom brown,
The humble peasant fingered her worn beads,
Made at her side her youngsters nestle down,
And told Madonna of her simple needs.
Next her, a dainty dame of Milan town,
Voluptuous as but southern rapture breeds,
Bewailing in the dust her too frail breast,
Begged Christ to be her lover and sole guest.

CXII

And many a tonsured head was there, that bore
The ascetic cowl, surmounting garments strict ;
Here the brown serge the loving Francis wore,
There the black robes of active Benedict ;
And Dominic's stern habit, splashed with gore,
Beneath which silently the hairshirt pricked ;
And, dotted in the carnal crowd anon,
Were pale-faced nuns, meek, circumspect, and wan.

CXIII

Then from afar a long procession came
Of white-robed acolytes silver censers swinging,
With wreathed flowers, and torches all aflame,
And golden bells melodiously ringing,
And fair young boys, with faces free from blame,
Tuning their callow throats to such sweet singing,
It seemed to eye and ear of faith and fear
That Christ and all His cherubim were near.

CXIV

And as they sang, the stately pomp swept on,
Crozier and Cross, inlaid with many a gem,
Taller than those that bore them ; lights that shone
In golden candlestick with jewelled stem,
And many a bright embroidered gonfalon
Vaunting aloft the new Jerusalem ;
And scintillating reliquary rare,
And awful Monstrance, whereon none may stare.

CXV

Last in the solemn train, in cope of gold
And snow-white alb, came venerable eld,
Mitre on head of more than earthly mould,
Led by grave priests, gorgeously chasubled.
And, as they passed, round arch and column old
Incense and organ music rolled and swelled,
Till the long line into the chancel poured,
And then with one acclaim they praised the Lord.

CXVI

“ All ye works of the Lord,” they loudly sang,
“ Bless ye the Lord, Praise Him for evermore !
Praise Him, ye waves, with your sonorous clang,
Praise Him, ye winds, Praise Him, O sea and shore !
Mountains, and little hills, and clouds that hang
Low o’er the deep, dews, snows, and pinnacles hoar,
Darkness and Light, storms that are silent never,
Bless ye the Lord, Praise Him for ever and ever !

CXVII

“ Bless ye the Lord, fountains and rivers that run,
Huge whales and monsters of the deep profound ;
Praise Him, ye lightnings, moon, and stars, and sun,
Birds of the air, and beasts that graze the ground !
Praise him for all the wondrous things He hath done ;
Praise Him on harps, Praise Him on cymbals of sound !
With sounding trumpet, timbrel, and organ, and chord,
Praise Him ! Let every spirit praise the Lord ! ”

CXVIII

Then on the dense mass sudden silence fell,
Each knee was bent, each reverent skullcap doffed,
Held was each breath, and, touched by unseen spell,
The organ fluted silvery and soft.
Then came the tinkle of a little bell,
And, all heads low, the Host was held aloft ;
While glinted through warm panes day's dying gleam,
And the rapt soul touched Heaven in a dream.

CXIX

Then once again the organ thundered loud,
Usurping the high edifice with sound,
Whereat with dumb accord the prostrate crowd
Rose, crossed themselves, and to the doorway wound ;
And soon where, late, myriads of knees were bowed
In phalanxed prayer, reigned solitude profound.
The solemn notes waxed faint, then swooned away,
And died along the aisles the light of day.

CXX

And now throughout the vague cathedral gloom,
That here and there with lone faint lamps was flecked,
Two forms alone were blackly seen to loom,
A kneeling maiden, and a man erect.
They looked like statues carven at a tomb,
Apeing the quick, with flowing drapery decked,
And praying with fixed lips and stony head
Till the last trump shall sound and rouse the dead.

CXXI

But, shortly rising, with a beckoning nod
She drew him forward through the pathless space,
And, on the hard smooth marble as they trod,
Their feet made fearsome echoes in the place.
Anon she checked him : "Stay you here with God,"
Whispering she said, "I will be back apace."
Among stone stems he saw her disappear,
Though still her flitting footfall reached his ear.

CXXII

At length that, too, deserted him ; and then,
He was alone in the tremendous gloom :
Alone with God, far from the help of men.
Like empty vault of monumental tomb,
More felt than seen, the dark roof smote his ken ;
The long aisles stretched like avenues of doom,
And, in the distant chancel dimly lit,
Bodiless forms seemed noiselessly to fit.

CXXIII

Left with his dark and solitary ache,
" If there be spirits of solace and light," he cried,
" Swoop from your spheres, your unseen Heaven forsake,
And now no more my lonely doubts deride.
Sound-sleeping martyrs, from the tomb awake !
Palm-bearing virgins, through the silence glide !
Can you be false who are indeed so fair ?
And if I needs must pray, then hear my prayer !

CXXIV

“ And thou, Olympia’s trust, once mine no less,
Of all the Gods gentlest Divinity !
Mother, and Lady of the mild caress,
Lend me thy face ! oh ! give me eyes to see !
If thou canst hear, why dost thou scorn distress,
Thou before whom the fiends of darkness flee ?
Let me behold thee once,—once, I entreat !—
E’en as Judea’s mountains felt thy feet ! ”

CXXV

Not such the prayers to which stern Heaven replies ;
The lips of faith another language speak ;
Celestial visions visit downcast eyes,
And those who find, not arrogantly seek.
No answer came to his presumptuous cries,
Such as, ’tis said, descends on suppliants meek,
But only deeper darkness, and a sense
Of unslaked thirst and yearning impotence.

CXXVI

At length, again, a solitary tread
Upon the silence gained, though far and faint ;
Yet well he guessed 'twas hers, than whom the dead
And never dying vaunt no purer saint.
Nearer, and ever nearer, now it sped,
Until his fancy her fair form could paint
On the dark space, and then the dark space yawned,
And she herself, no fancy, on him dawned.

CXXVII

“ Come with me, now,” she said, in accents low,
And straightway led him with such sure command
Among dense columned aisles, it seemed as though
Athwart a lonesome wood where huge trunks stand,
Baulking straight steps, together they did go,
He strange, and she familiar in the land,
Where, overhead, thick-matted branches made
Day night, and night a more cimmerician shade.

CXXVIII

But shortly shone a little light ahead,
Just level with their gaze ; a feeble flame,
Held by a priest in cassock habited,
And in mid-doorway seen as in a frame.
He stood as still as stand the pictured dead,
When some deft hand makes death and life the same,
And bids one, doubtful, nearer draw, and seek
If that which gazes so, perchance will speak.

CXXIX

But ere the living presence could be proved,
Olympia's aid had vanished from his side ;
The tall dark figure in the doorway moved,
And with fine gesture welcome fair implied.
He, by the stately courtesy behaved
To pass within, with slow assenting stride
Entered, the other slowly following him ;
Then the door closed, and all again was dim.

CXXX

And where was now Olympia? Ask you where?
She to the gloaming chancel back had crept,
And, hope and fear absorbed in silent prayer,
Lay prone, aye prostrate, even as though she slept.
The flowing tresses of her warm, soft hair,
Dark as the gloom, the cold white marble swept;
She moved not, spake not, sighed not; even her breath
Came faint, like one that feebly copes with death.

CXXXI

But, slowly rising thence, her body first
She lifted, then her hands, and last her eyes;
And floods of passionate supplication burst,
Through lips long sealed, from breast o'ercharged with sighs.
She called on Christ, on Her who bore and nursed,
On every Saint and Seraph in the skies,
And vowed herself to pain, if Heaven would save
From death the dear imperilled soul it gave.

CXXXII

“ Oh, by Thine agony and bloody sweat,
Deliver him, O Lord ! ” she vainly cried ;
“ By Thy keen Cross and Passion, save him yet,
Save by Thy crown of thorns and bleeding side !
Why did Gethsemane Thy tear-drops wet ?
Why wert Thou scourged, why scorned, why crucified ?
Why didst Thou die, why gloriously ascend,
Why send the Comforter, be this the end ? ”

CXXXIII

Then in a tempest of hot tears her cries
Were drenched and drowned, her weak words washed away ;
Her tears were choked with sobs, sobs swooned to sighs,
Then sighs to silence, and all mute she lay.
Oh, if there be a Heaven beyond the skies,
A Heaven to hear, why was it deaf that day ?
For, since time's dawn, unto the realms of air
No holier heart e'er breathed a purer prayer.

CXXXIV

“ Rise, my dear child,” a mild voice gravely said,
“ Rise and accept your doom : ” whereat she rose.
“ In vain is Reason’s dew when Faith is dead,
And Grace sleeps silent under Doubt’s deep snows
I can no more. The Paraclete hath fled ;
Through his parched bosom prayer no longer flows.
By Heaven may yet the miracle be wrought ;
But human ways are weak, and words are nought.

CXXXV

Then, lamp in hand, through choir and transept dim
He led them, till they reached a little door,
And, having fatherly blessed her and him,
Closed it, and they beheld his face no more.
The sky was bright with starry cherubim,
Silent, and round them was the city’s roar ;
And, in their hearts, an anguish of despair,
Too deep for utterance, and too dark for prayer.

CXXXVI

There motionless they stood, bereft of speech,
As vessels stranded wait for some fresh wave
That yet perhaps will lift them from the beach,
And bear them buoyant o'er the breakers brave.
None came ; yet still they lingered, each for each,
Two lonely mourners at an open grave,
Which holds the dead and must be filled with clay,
Though neither hath the heart to turn away.

CXXXVII

At length when too oppressive grew the strain,
"Will you not sleep in Milan, dear?" he said ;
Thus seeking with life's need to fly from pain,
And have his instant sentence respited.
But she, who knew delay was worse than vain,
Raised deprecating hand, and shook her head ;
"No, Godfrid ! Here, our task is ended quite :
Let us retrace our pilgrimage to-night !"

CXXXVIII

So once again they fled without delay,
On wings of wind through leagues of dim-seen land,
Night and the stars accompanying their way,
And roar and blackness close on either hand ;
Until the dark drew off, and with the day
They saw the sparkling bay and joyous strand,
White sails, brown oars, huge coils of briny ropes,
And fair proud city throned on regal slopes.

CXXXIX

And soon the road they came by, which had run
Close by the sea, now smooth as woodland pond,
Saw them once more, love-woven dream unspun,
Facing farewell. A little way beyond,
A sleek brown mule stood blinking in the sun,
For a long march rudely caparisoned ;
And at its side a gentle mountaineer,
Who to their grief lent neither eye nor ear.

CXL

“Hearken once more, Olympia! Must we part?
Is Heaven so stern, and can a gentle breast
Inflict, and sooth endure, so keen a smart,
When charity could lull our pain to rest?
Is there no common Eden of the heart,
Where each fond bosom is a welcome guest?
No comprehensive Paradise, to hold
All loving souls in one celestial fold?”

CXLI

“Here, 'twixt the mountains and the sea, I swear
That I your Faith will reverence as my soul,
And as when first I succoured your despair
By the dark streamlet and the blossoming bole,
I every dewy dawn fresh flowers will bear
Unto Madonna's shrine, that happy goal
Where our first journey ended, and I fain
Would have this end,—not close, as now, in pain!”

CXLII

The foam-fringe at their feet was not more white
Than her pale cheek as, steadfast, she replied :
“ No, Godfrid ! no ! Farewell, farewell ! You might
Have been my star ; a Star once fell by pride :
But since you furl your wings, and veil your light,
I cling to Mary and Christ crucified.
Leave me, nay leave me, ere it be too late !
Better part here than part at Heaven's gate !

CXLIII

Thereat he kissed her forehead, she his hand,
And on the mule he mounted her, and then,
Along the road that skirts the devious strand,
Watched her, until she vanished from his ken.
Tears vainly dropped as water upon sand
Or words of grace on hearts of hardened men,
Coursed down her cheek, while, half her grief divined,
The mountain guide walked sad and mute behind.

CXLIV

But never more as in the simple days
When prayer was all her thought, her heart shall be ;
For she is burdened with the grief that stays,
And by a shadow vexed that will not flee.
Pure, but not spared, she passes from our gaze,
Victim, not vanquisher of Love. And he ?
Once more an exile over land and main :—
Ah ! Life is sad, and scarcely worth the pain !

THE END



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‘in the sculptured woodland’s leafless aisles
The robin chants the vespers of the year.’

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‘Blessing the brave bleak land where he was born,’

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'Men deemed thee fallen, did they?'

he asks—

'Not wholly shorn of strength, but vainly strong,'

and lapped in the luxury of a fool's paradise, because secure, in the last resort,

'Behind the impassable fences of the foam.'

But 'thou dost but stand erect,' he says, and the interloper falls back foiled, while 'the nations cluster round,' and above them

'Thou, 'mid thy sheaves in peaceful seasons stored,
Towerest supreme, victor without a blow,
Smilingly leaning on thy undrawn sword.'

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